

# Ten Rules

## for New Technical Communication Graduates

BY ANGELA PETIT, *Member*

**T**oo many graduates of technical communication programs start their careers with little, if any, actual workplace experience. Programs address this problem through internships, cooperative positions, case studies, and projects that link the classroom to the workplace. As valuable as they are, these experiences cannot fully prepare students for the challenges they will face when they begin a full-time position that does not end in a term. In fact, new graduates may discover that the biggest adjustment they make as they begin their careers is to *unlearn* the rules that helped them excel in the classroom, and learn the sometimes contradictory rules that govern their new workplace.

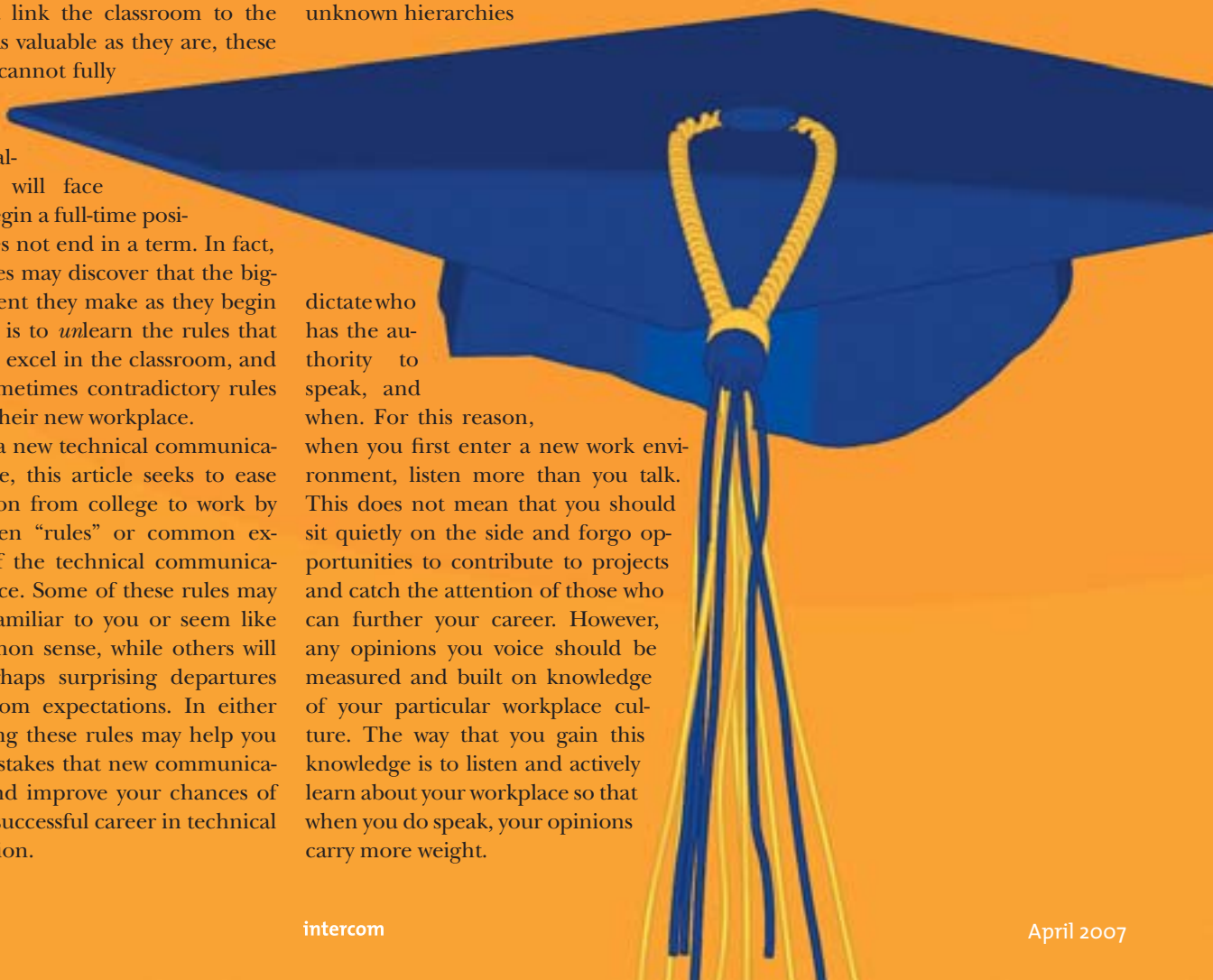
If you are a new technical communication graduate, this article seeks to ease your transition from college to work by presenting ten “rules” or common expectations of the technical communication workplace. Some of these rules may already be familiar to you or seem like simple common sense, while others will be new, perhaps surprising departures from classroom expectations. In either case, following these rules may help you avoid the mistakes that new communicators make and improve your chances of launching a successful career in technical communication.

### Rule 1.

#### Listen

In technical communication courses, your value to the course is often measured by your willingness to speak up, participate in discussions, and challenge what your classmates and, at times, professors say. The reverse is true in most workplaces, where complex and—for new employees — unknown hierarchies

dictate who has the authority to speak, and when. For this reason, when you first enter a new work environment, listen more than you talk. This does not mean that you should sit quietly on the side and forgo opportunities to contribute to projects and catch the attention of those who can further your career. However, any opinions you voice should be measured and built on knowledge of your particular workplace culture. The way that you gain this knowledge is to listen and actively learn about your workplace so that when you do speak, your opinions carry more weight.



## Rule 2.

### Only Put It in Writing If You Really Want It in Writing

Electronic communication shapes the work that takes place on campuses and in corporations, small businesses, government agencies, and other workplaces. As is to be expected, electronic communication is less restricted on campuses than in most nonacademic spaces. For this reason, be especially careful of what you write in e-mail messages, blogs, and instant messaging (IM) conversations, especially those that comment on your job, coworkers, and company. *Always* assume that your company e-mail account is being screened. Also, assume that if you access an off-site e-mail account, IM account, or blog using your company's network, these communications are being monitored. Finally, assume that any company information you share in a blog—even if you do so on your own time, on your own computer, and on a noncompany network—could be read by your employer and lead to problems at work, including dismissal.

## Rule 3.

### Don't Expect a Byline

Students who earn their degrees in humanities-based technical communication programs are trained to value the individual author. In these environments, the creator of a work owns that work, and his or her name is emblazoned under the title, becoming an integral part of the work itself. Most nonacademic workplaces simply do not adhere to this notion of author as owner. More than likely, as a technical communicator, you will never see your name in print, and the works you produce will be documents with anonymous or "corporate" authorship and ownership. Obviously, technical communication is not the field for someone who seeks name recognition for the works he or she creates. It is, however, the place for someone who appreciates an environment where the work itself is the focus, and who receives more satisfaction from bringing a collective effort to completion than from individual name recognition.

## Rule 4.

### View Communication as Collaborative

The image of the solitary author toiling away late into the night is still the norm in many academic fields. Despite the prevalence of collaborative pedagogies in college, this image informs many students' notions of how authors communicate with the world around them. In the nonacademic sphere, document production is, at its core, a collaborative exercise; teams, rather than individuals, generate documents. When you enter this sphere, learning to work successfully in a team is as important as the actual writing, designing, usability testing, programming, or other communication work that you do. If you find working collaboratively a challenge, just remember that working in a team has its benefits. Rarely will you shoulder the burden of creating documents on your own, but you *will* help produce documents that no one person could have created individually.

## Rule 5.

### Prepare to Be Ignored

In small, interactive classrooms, star students stand out as they lead discussions, earn the highest grades, and win a greater share of the professor's attention. This is not the case in most nonacademic workplaces, where new employees can quickly feel lost in the shuffle. Despite their academic accomplishments, beginning communicators often receive the more tedious, less interesting assignments. Moreover, *all* technical communicators—beginner or advanced—have at one time or another been ignored by the subject matter experts they must interview to complete a project. Finally, like all employees, technical communicators work under the specter of downsizing decisions based not on talent, work ethic, or loyalty, but on economic factors beyond the individual employee. Still, as bleak as this situation sounds, keep in mind that if you excel in your role as a technical communicator, your work will get noticed and lead to greater opportunities.

## Rule 6.

### Create Positive Workplace Relationships

Consider this rule a response to the three preceding ones, each of which downplays the importance of the individual communicator. If workplace communicators rarely receive credit as creators of their works, produce documents collaboratively, and risk being ignored, then how can graduates moving into the workplace earn recognition for their work? The answer is that they do so through the relationships they create with coworkers, supervisors, clients, and others connected to their workplace. Often, these relationships are profoundly different from ones created in the classroom, where, regardless of any friendships or animosities that arose during the term, students are free to walk away at the end of the semester or quarter. Workplace relationships are built over time and, when nurtured properly, lead to recognition for the individual communicator. As you interact with colleagues, supervisors, and clients, always remember that it will be these people who recognize your abilities and reward you for them.

## Rule 7.

### Justify the Value of What You Do

In technical communication classrooms, the value of communication is implicit. Rarely does anyone in these contexts argue that communication is irrelevant or unimportant. In the workplace, however, the work that you do will be appreciated only if it adds value to your organization in the form of more usable documents, increased profits, greater efficiency, reduced operating costs, or some other (preferably quantifiable) factor. Even if your work does add value to your organization, never assume that this value is self-evident to your employer. Be aware of the impact that your documents have on the organization and, if necessary, be prepared to make the case that what you do contributes to your organization's well-being.

The opportunities in our profession are boundless, with technical communication touching on countless other fields. Few professions are as interesting and exciting, or have such a promising future.

## Rule 8.

### Expand Your Skill Set—Constantly

Already know *FrameMaker* and XML? What about DITA? Can you create online help systems tailored to your organization's needs? How are your graphic design abilities? Can you write code that will connect a company's database to its documents? Do you have a background in human factors? As these questions suggest, technical communication is a broad and rapidly evolving profession. To succeed in this environment, view your degree as merely a starting point and accept that the skills you gained in college may be obsolete in as few as five years. For this reason, never stop learning—enroll in STC seminars, join your local chapter, take additional technical communication courses, pick up courses and even degrees in secondary areas, monitor technical communication job ads to determine trends, and learn new software and programming languages that will dominate the profession. In other words, do everything you can to remain current in the dynamic field of technical communication.

## Rule 9.

### Be Prepared to Produce— All Day, Every Day

If you are a new graduate, one aspect of your new career that may surprise you is just how much work you will be expected to do on a daily basis. The typical college course requires one or two major projects per semester or quarter. In contrast, workplace communicators are often expected to produce all day, every day—whether it be pages, graphics, design, code, data—and not just for one project, but for several competing projects.

What's more, precious little time exists for the planning, research, and other critical tasks that well-designed technical communication courses encourage. Even procrastination is a luxury requiring time you simply do not have. In the workplace, your goal will be to produce, produce, produce—and to do so within strict time and cost limits. More important than even your communication skills will be your ability to budget time

wisely to complete the projects to which you are assigned.

## Rule 10.

### Love What You Do

As technical communicators, we are in the enviable position of being employed to do, every day, what we have been trained to do. The opportunities in our profession are boundless, with technical communication touching on countless other fields. Few professions are as interesting and exciting, or have such a promising future. However, as the previous nine rules suggest, our field is a demanding one. To succeed as a technical communicator, you must love what you do. Technical communication is not a profession for the faint-hearted or those who would rather be doing something else. The most successful technical communicators “have it in their blood,” and if they were employed in some other capacity, they would offer to redesign the company logo or perform free usability testing on the latest engineering product. If you do love technical communication, chances are you will find your career immensely satisfying, rewarding you with interesting work for years to come.

### Beyond the Classroom

No doubt, every technical communicator has a unique set of rules for navigating the workplace, and new and veteran communicators alike will agree with some of the rules in this article, disagree with others, and add a few of their own. We all enter the profession as novices and must learn as we go, discovering things that only experience can teach us. Given how broad technical communication is, no one set of rules can capture everyone's experience. I hope, however, that this article will encourage new graduates to start thinking beyond the classroom as they embark on their careers. **i**

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*After a decade as a technical communication instructor, Angela Petit left academia to pursue nonacademic work in technical communication. She currently serves as the lone writer for an educational services provider based in Salt Lake City, Utah, and is a member of the Intermountain Chapter STC.*